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SUBJECT: ADIVASI TRIBALS IN ASSAM AGITATE; STATE CONGRESS GOVERNMENT
IN A BIND

REF: KOLKATA 0361

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Assam's "tea tribes" or Adivasis have increased their protests and agitations to pressure the state and national governments for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status under the Indian Constitution. In recent weeks, members of the Adivasi community have organized a violent rally in Guwahati, Assam and claimed responsibility for a train blast on December ¶13. Native Assamese tribal groups, such as the Bodos, have warned the Congress-led state government against including more communities in the ST list and the tea tribes continue to face ethnic discrimination in Assam. The Congress party counts on the tea tribes as a stable vote bank but the Bodo party is also a part of the Congress-led coalition government. The Congress is struggling to accommodate both groups in anticipation of the December Panchayat (village council) elections. The Congress' predicament may create window for the newly-formed Muslim party, the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), to step into the political limelight. End Summary.

Tribals, But Not Natives

¶2. (U) The tea tribes or Adivasis continue to face ethnic discrimination in Assam. In the 19th century, British tea planters brought the Adivasis to Assam from the Jharkhand region as indentured servants to work in the tea fields. Over the course of two centuries, they settled in and around the tea gardens, as cultivators and as household help in Assamese homes. The 3.5 million Adivasis continue to be socially segregated from the mainstream Assamese society. During the 1990s, the Adivasis in the Bodoland Territorial Council area suffered the brunt of "ethnic cleansing" violence when the Bodoland tribal movement was at its peak. Many Adivasis, who were displaced by Bodo violence, continue to live in relief camps in Kokrajhar. In response to continued discrimination and violence, the Adivasis formed the Adivasi National Liberation Army (ANLA) in late 2006. The group is believed to have a strength of 70-80 active militants.

The Politics of Tribal Status

¶3. (U) Apart from the specific legal criteria, the problem of

determining which groups are tribal is both subtle and complex. The President of India and state governors have the authority to compile a list of castes and tribes under the Indian Constitution and may edit the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) list as necessary. However, economic interests and voting blocs make the SC/ST issue controversial. The SC/ST benefits awarded to Scheduled Tribes, such as reservations in schools and government jobs, have convinced many groups that they will enjoy greater advantages if so designated. Critics state that groups who have lost their "tribal" characteristics and have entered into mainstream society should not retain their scheduled tribe status. The SC/ST list is also state specific, meaning that a member of Scheduled Tribe is eligible for benefits in his state of origin only. While a scheduled tribe in Jharkhand, the tea tribes or Adivasis are non-native to Assam and so are not listed on the Assam ST list. The Adivasis in Assam maintain that they remain cut off from mainstream Assamese society, still retain their tribal characteristics and so should be included on the Assam ST list.

A Shift to Violence and Protest in Assam

14. (U) In November, the All Assam Adivasi Students Union (AAASU) organized a violent rally in Guwahati, Assam, to demand Scheduled Tribe (ST) status (reftel). Local residents retaliated and the situation spiraled out of control before the police arrived. One person died, scores of people were injured and one Adivasi woman was stripped naked by a local. On December 10, Assam police arrested six Adivasi militants following reports that the Adivasi National Liberation Army (ANLA) was planning a reprisal for the stripping of the Adivasi girl on November 24. On December 13, the ANLA claimed responsibility for a bomb blast on the Delhi-bound Rajdhani

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Express train, passing through Assam's Golaghat district. The blast killed five and injured four others.

A Pan-Tribal Identity

15. (U) Prominent Jharkhand leaders Arjun Munda, Babulal Marandi and Shibu Soren visited Assam to show solidarity with the tea tribe Adivasis, who are ethnically and culturally similar to the Jharkhand tribals. Bandhs (general strikes) by Adivasis in Assam and Jharkhand helped to highlight the issue in both states as well as reinforced the goal of national tribal unity. Former Chief Ministers Munda of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Marandi of the Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (JVM) criticized Assam's Congress government for the present situation. Tribal organizations in Jharkhand have threatened to launch an economic blockade if the GOI refuses to grant ST status to Assam's Adivasis.

Tribal Politics affect Local Elections

16. (U) Assam Panchayat elections are scheduled for the beginning of the new year (December 31 to January 9). The state's ruling Congress party has traditionally counted on the tea tribes as a stable vote bank but has done little to improve their lot. As the Adivasis now demand ST status, ST groups in Assam, such as the Bodos, have warned the government against including more communities in the ST list. The All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS), the state's main native tribal body, is worried that including more groups on the ST list will reduce the native tribals' piece of the reservation pie. The AATS has spoken out against expanding the ST list and declared that granting ST status to more groups will threaten the interests and political rights of the existing tribal population in Assam. The six communities in Assam seeking ST status include the Tai Ahom, the Muttok, the Moran, the Chutia, the Koch Rajbongshi and the Adivasis. The

state government is in favor of bringing in these communities into the ST list, but remains fearful of a strong reaction -- political and violent -- from native tribal groups.

Muslim Politics

17. (U) The Congress-led coalition government in Assam depends upon the Hagrama Mahilary faction of the Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF-H). The BPPF-H has voiced its opposition to increasing the number of ST tribes in Assam. In order to stay in power, the Congress cannot afford to lose their support, a likely event if the Adivasis are granted ST status. On the other hand, the tea tribes control or influence the poll verdict in at least 20 of Assam's 126 Assembly constituencies and traditionally vote Congress.

18. (SBU) A political analyst suggested that Muslim leader Badruddin Ajmal could use the Adivasi issue to his advantage to increase his party's influence in the state. Under continued pressure, Congress may be forced to grant special status to Adivasis. This move would upset the BPPF-H, which would withdraw its support from the government. In order to stay in power, the Congress will need to turn to other political allies such as Ajmal's Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF). The AUDF would thus become a critical coalition partner and could use that political leverage to promote its own pro-Muslim agenda within the state.

19. (SBU) Comment: Folding to political pressure, the Congress-led Assam government will probably grant the Adivasis ST status, even if the community may not be traditionally defined as such. In case an annoyed BPPF-H decides to withdraw its support, Congress Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi may be compelled to depend on the AUDF for his political survival. This native/non-native tribe showdown might increase the Muslim AUDF's influence on Assam's state politics as the Congress struggles to maintain control of the coalition government.
JARDINE